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Batavia Through the Eyes of Vietnamese Envoys

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Introduction

Ever since John Smail called on scholars in the early sixties to leave behind the Eurocentric writings of colonial-era historians and create an "autonomous history" for Southeast Asia, historians have been faced with a major conundrum: how to write about the past from a "native" perspective when there are few (if any) extant, indigenous sources.¹ Scholars have thus done their best to write accounts based on the more numerous Western records, that nonetheless give primacy to the local perspective. While such works invariably still receive criticism, they are nonetheless becoming ever more sophisticated.

One type of source that has not been as extensively employed in this endeavor, however, are the accounts that fellow Southeast Asians have made of their neighbors. To be sure, such works are not free of their own biases. Nevertheless they can provide us with a valuable picture of "how the world was viewed from specific places."² In this paper I will discuss just such a "view": specifically, how Batavia was seen from Viet Nam in the mid-nineteenth century. I will do so by examining two accounts made by Vietnamese envoys who traveled to Batavia in 1833 and 1844, respectively. Before looking at these two texts, however, I will begin with a quick overview of Vietnamese relations with island Southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century. Following that,

I will introduce the two envoys and examine how some of their observations were biased by the influence that the Chinese world-view exerted on their imaginations. Having covered this important background information, I will then move beyond these considerations to determine what particular insights the two accounts provide into conditions in mid nineteenth-century Batavia. The main argument of the paper will be that the discrepancies between these two travelogues indicate the influence of the changes that were taking place in Batavia (and the larger Asian world) at the time.

Nguyễn Viet Nam and Island Southeast Asia

During the first half of the nineteenth century the Nguyễn dynasty adhered to a rather indecisive foreign policy. Harboring no Chinese-style illusions that their country could be economically self-sufficient, the dynasty was still unsure if Vietnamese society could withstand the pernicious influences that would slip in alongside Western commerce. Thus, they wavered between policies of prohibition that called for "closing the gates and locking the harbors" (bê môn tóa cảng) to encouragement of foreign commerce and what came to be known as "bread and milk studies" (hoc bánh tây sữa bò), that is, the study of Western languages, technology, and culture.³

Through all of this time, contacts with island Southeast Asia, both official and illicit, served as a crucial link between Viet Nam and the outside world. Official Nguyễn missions to the south began as early as 1788 when Nguyễn Phúc Anh, the future emperor Gia Long, sent military men to Melaka and Penang to purchase arms to aid in the fight against the Tây Sơn rebels. Once the country was unified and the dynasty's position had become stable, Gia Long ceased sending missions to the south, but illicit contacts continued. In particular, Vietnamese merchants from the south illegally exported rice from the Mekong delta to the islands, and in return, smuggled in opium. Those who succeeded undoubtedly reaped great profits, for even some officials engaged in this illicit trade after missions to the south were resumed under Minh Mang.⁴ These later missions differed in character from those that Gia Long had commissioned. Under Minh Mang, and later under Thiệu Tri, the purpose of these missions was not to procure arms, but information. In particular, the court was interested in finding out whatever it could about the activities of the Western powers in the region. In keeping with this change in focus, the envoys who went south under Minh Mang and Thiệu Tri were increasingly from the civil bureaucracy, in contrast to the mercenaries that Gia Long had sent to purchase weapons.⁵

Thanks to a recent study by the late Chen Jinghe, we can now see that this effort to understand what was happening in the outside world was a major endeavor on the part of the Nguyễn dynasty. Professor Chen meticulously combed through the Veritable Records of Imperial Viet Nam (Đại Nam thực lục chính biên), the records of the day-to-day business of the Vietnamese court, and based on citations found there, put together a chronology of official missions to the islands to the south between the years 1788-1846. He was able to identify 49 such missions, the vast majority (40 missions) taking place from 1823-1846.⁶ Hence, these 23 years can be seen as a period of intense information gathering, and it is in this period that the two travelers to be discussed here made their journeys to Batavia.

Phan Huy Chú (1782-1840) and Cao Bá Quát (1809-1854)

Phan Huy Chú was born in 1782 in the village of Thuy Khê in Sơn Tây province, approximately 26 kilometers to the southwest of Hà Nội. He was the product of the union of two prominent scholar-official families, the Phan's and the Ngos. These influential family members, however, were still not powerful enough to prevent his father's (Phan Huy Ích) past service to the Tây Sơn from hindering Phan Huy Chú's prospects in the early years of Nguyễn rule. Thus, until Emperor Minh Mạng appointed him to a position in the bureaucracy in 1820, Phan Huy Chú devoted the preceding years to study and research, ultimately culminating in the completion in 1821 of his monumental Reference Book of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties (Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí). Over the following thirteen years, like the careers of many other officials during this period, Phan Huy Chú's rose and fell, taking its most precipitous dive after returning from an embassy to China in 1832 when Minh Mạng demoted Phan Huy Chú and the other three ambassadors for failing to compose a detailed account of conditions in China. Phan Huy Chú's trip to Batavia at the end of the same year was thus an opportunity for him to redeem himself, and his report, the Summary Account of a Sea Journey (Hải trình chí lược), did precisely that. Rather than continuing to serve the court, however, Phan Huy Chú decided to retire to his home in the countryside, where he passed away seven years later, in 1840.⁷

While Phan Huy Chú was a scholar who found it difficult to adapt to the requirements of bureaucratic life, Cao Bá Quát, on the other hand, was a brilliant gadfly whose mere presence in the bureaucracy was a threat to its very existence. Born into a prominent scholar-official family in Bắc Ninh province, he was a precocious child. It was undoubtedly his exceptional intelligence that made him impatient with the stagnant formalities of the examination system. As a result, he repeatedly failed the metropolitan exams at Huế, his insolent wit always making his exam books both recognizable and unacceptable. Nonetheless, his fame as a literary star ultimately allowed him to bypass the exam process and enter the bureaucracy by means of an imperial appointment to the Ministry of Rites.⁸ However, he was soon implicated in a scandal that emerged around the examination of 1841, and was imprisoned. Thus, like Phan Huy Chú, Cao Bá Quát's journey to Batavia in 1844 was an opportunity to return to graces with the emperor, and Cao, like Phan, was successful in this respect. However, following his return, Cao Bá Quát did not live out his days in retirement as Phan Huy Chú had done, but continued to act as a gadfly until he was finally executed in 1854 for having supported an insurrection against the court.⁹

From these two brief sketches it should be clear that we are dealing with two very different personalities. Phan Huy Chú was a scholar who desired to clear his name before retiring to a life of study, and Cao Bá Quát was an iconoclastic firebrand who stood by his convictions until the tragic end. These differences are invariably reflected in the content of their writings. In fact, not only does their content differ, but the actual literary genres that they chose to record their observations in differed as well. Traditional Chinese travel accounts, of which the Vietnamese were heirs and proponents, constitute a variant of writing that is exceptional in Chinese literature in that it combines both poetry and narrative.¹⁰ Hence, in their works Chinese and Vietnamese travel writers acted as both historians and poets. They "objectively" recorded the facts of their trips; then subjectively commented on their experiences in verse. In the two

accounts examined here, however, these styles are not in their usual combined form. Phan Huy Chú chose to write an "objective" narrative of the conditions prevailing in the islands to the south while Cao Bá Quát composed thirty-six poems to record his understanding and feelings of the same.¹¹

Influence of the Chinese World-View

Woodside has discussed how the Nguyễn court adopted the framework of the Chinese world order and attempted to fashion an imitation tributary system with itself as center. One symptom of this phenomenon, he notes, was how the Vietnamese appropriated derogatory geographical terminology from the Chinese to refer to the surrounding areas: thereby reinforcing the image of Huế as the civilized center.¹² *Ha châu*, a term that was used by the Vietnamese to refer to slightly different parts of island Southeast Asia at various times, is a good example of this.¹³ "Ha," meaning both "below," as well as "lesser" or "inferior," clearly placed the islands, "châu,"¹⁴ to the south in their proper egographical and moral relationship to the Hue court to the north.

While Woodside emphasized the superficiality and inconsistencies of this attempt on the part of the Vietnamese to adopt the Chinese world order, the travel accounts of Phan Huy Chú and Cao Bá Quát suggest that this world- view was much more deeply ingrained in the Vietnamese imagination than Woodside had suspected. In fact, their writings show that the similarities between the way that the Vietnamese regarded island Southeast Asia and the way that the Chinese had traditionally regarded their own "south," (that is, the entire area south of the Yangzi River, including Viet Nam) went far beyond the mere use of geographical terminology. To take one example, the Chinese had always perceived a direct link between imbalances in the southern environment and the inferior moral stature of the southern peoples. Hence, when the Chinese monk Dashan traveled to southern Viet Nam in 1694 he noted how many of the lotus plants there had flowers but no deep roots, which he then said was analogous to the Vietnamese "people who, lacking inner virtue, try to decorate their exteriors."¹⁵

In his Summary Account of a Sea Journey, Phan Huy Chú made similar observations about the environment of the Indonesian archipelago, however, with the important distinction that his objects of comparison were uniquely Southeast Asian. Take first, for instance, his comments about the produce in Singapore:

In Tân Gia Ba (Singapore) there is little rice, so they mainly eat wheat. As for fresh produce, there are many different kinds of vegetables in the markets. Duck and chicken are expensive. Pork, however, is cheap. There is not much betel, however there is a lot of areca. The incompleteness of the goods is perhaps a result of the environment.¹⁶

No Chinese traveler to the south would ever take areca and betel as standards for testing the environmental balance. To the Chinese, these items were uniquely southern, and thus, their very existence indicated a world out of balance. The areca palm, after all, was the home of the horrible, serpent-eating zhen bird and had no place in a world where yin and yang were in equilibrium.¹⁷ Phan Huy Chú, however, coming himself from mainland Southeast Asia, where

betel was the "daily social lubricant," was well aware that this custom required the interaction of the three essential ingredients of betel, areca, and lime, and was thus quick to notice if any one of these three elements was lacking.¹⁸

To be fair, Phan Huy Chú did later note that the betel and areca in Batavia were "top rate," and that the markets there were generally filled with an abundance of the same goods found in Viet Nam. However, even with all of its fresh produce, Batavia was still lacking in some respects. Phan noted that "since there is no fish sauce, the food does not taste delicious."¹⁹ This comment is especially interesting when we contrast it with a remark that a Chinese was to make two years later in Viet Nam. Cai Tinglan, in noting what was lacking in Vietnamese culinary habits, mentioned that, "They also do not have soy sauce. Instead, they use 'fish sauce' which has a real stench to it."²⁰ Thus, here again we see Phan Huy Chú describing these new lands in much the same way that the Chinese described his own land (i.e., in terms of what was lacking); the important difference being that his criteria were uniquely Southeast Asian.

Another way in which the archipelago was perceived to be lacking was in its climate. Just as the Chinese complained of Viet Nam's heat and miasmas, so did Phan Huy Chú comment about the islands' sweltering temperature and the ease with which visitors could fall gravely ill. The only remedy, according to Phan, was to bathe both morning and night in the river, as the locals did, to "wash away the poisons." This practice was apparently well-accepted, for as Phan noted, "The people who arrive do not dare to go against this custom, and all follow it."²¹

Bathing in the rivers or canals, however, meant slipping into waters infested with crocodiles. To Phan Huy Chú there was nothing shocking about the mere presence of crocodiles, for unlike Chinese travelers to the south who found these animals fearsome and repulsive, Vietnamese were familiar with these creatures. What alarmed Phan, however, was the docility of the crocodiles in Batavia. They would lie in the river without batting an eye while bathers and boats passed by. Phan explained that according to local tradition these animals were tame because of talismans that the people placed in the water. However, Phan dismissed this explanation by asking rhetorically, "How could the magical powers of these barbarians possibly tame these animals?" Instead, he concluded that the sea spirits in the area must be particularly powerful, for the crocodiles' behavior was something which was beyond the ken of human control.²² In any case, it was yet one more indication that the archipelago was a land out of proper balance.

Another sphere in which environmental imbalances were traditionally manifested in the Chinese world-view was in the realm of gender relations and sexuality. Stevan Harrell has recently referred to this phenomenon in Chinese writings as the "sexual metaphor," and has argued that it is part of a common strategy where certain civilizations "have seen peripheral peoples as both erotic and promiscuous in their behavior, as being at a lower level of culture where they have not yet learned the proper civilized morals of sexual repression and/or hypocrisy."²³ Again, to the Chinese this went hand in hand with environmental imbalances. Thus, the south, over-endowed as it was with the feminine yin essence, in contrast to the masculine yang essence of the north, was traditionally famous for its seductive women. They were usually depicted in exotic/erotic terms that featured their supposed promiscuity. This is precisely the kind of imagery that Cao Bá

Quát employed to depict women from the Indonesian archipelago in his short poem, "Ballad For a Barbarian Woman" (Man phu hành):

Truong san thôn dâu man tieu cô,	In a country tavern, a young barbarian lass,
Lâu tru nhu diên thê nhu phu.	With a face like a sow's and skin pitch black.
Băn kiêu du biên mô quy khu,	Across the plank bridge she roams, returning at dusk,
Tiêu hoán tân nhân tán co phù.	Laughing and calling to her new man, while still praising her ex. ²⁴

The strength of Cao's disdain for local women becomes all the more evident when one compares this poem with another ballad that he wrote: "Ballad For a Western Woman" (Duong phu hành). In this poem Cao displays his infatuation with the novel beauty of a Western women and longs for her companionship:

Tây duong thieu phu y nhu thuyet,	A young Western mistress, her garments like snow,
doc bang lang kiên toa thanh nguyet.	Sits in the clear moonlight leaning on the shoulder of her beau.
Khuoc vong Nam thuyen dang hoa minh,	Toward the bright lanterns on the southern ships she gazes,
Ba due nam nam huong lang thuyet.	Grabbing his sleeve, she turns to him and whispers.
Nht uyên de ho thu lan tri,	Her hand nonchalantly holding a dish of milk
Da han vo na hai phong xuy.	The night is cold with the wind coming off the sea.

Phiên thân canh thiên lang
phu khoi,

Turning, she stretches and he helps her
up,

Khoi thuc Nam nhân biet
lì?

How could she know that this Southern
man is separated from home?²⁵

Phan Huy Chú did not share these views. Instead, his account from eleven years before that of Cao's identified more with the Javanese than with the Europeans. This is clear from the following passage where he discusses the differences in appearance and behavior between the "Red Hairs" and the Javanese:²⁶

The Red Hairs have scarlet hair, dragon whiskers, big noses, and sunken eyes - appearances that are quite detestable. As for the do Bà[Javanese], although their skin and faces are black, in appearance they are otherwise no different from the people of our own country. In general, the majority of Red Hairs are aggressive and crafty, while the do Bà are simple and docile. Hence, that "the five directions have different characteristics" is because of the different natural essences (khí/qi) in the respective areas.²⁷

These examples thus indicate the extent to which Chinese patterns of comprehending foreign lands and peoples had been assimilated by the Vietnamese. At the same time, I have also tried to both point out some of the ways in which the Vietnamese also modified or "Southeast Asian-ized" this world-view, and the ways in which Cao and Phan exhibited their own preferences, for these are all factors that we must keep in mind as we examine their accounts further in the next section.

Perceptions of Batavia

Phan Huy Chú and Cao Bá Quát made precious few comments about the native Javanese population. The bulk of their accounts deal with the Europeans and the Chinese. The reasons for this bias are quite simple. Their missions were both to find out about the activities of the Europeans in the region, and their main sources for this information were the resident Chinese. Nonetheless, Phan's and Cao's comments about the Europeans and the Chinese are not uniform. This may partly be explained by the fact that the genres that they employed led to emphasis of different elements. More likely, however, is that they were able, through their talks with the local Chinese, to get a sense of the changing dynamics in the area and, in particular, the changing relations between the Europeans, Chinese, and Javanese.

The period in which Phan Huy Chú and Cao Bá Quát visited Batavia was, after all, a time of transition on many different fronts. Scholars have discerned, for instance, a move at this time towards more clearly defined boundaries between ethnic groups: the beginnings of what would later become a "plural society." Jean Gelman Taylor, in tracing the contours of this process as it related to the Dutch in Batavia, has illustrated that starting in the eighteenth century, there was

a persistent attack on local mestizo culture from the European elite; first under the Enlightenment-influenced ideas of Governor-General van Imhoff, then later taken up during the break in Dutch rule at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Governors-General Daendels and Raffles, and finally, continued with the resurgence of the old order after the restoration of Dutch rule in 1819. Over time this crusade succeeded in privileging pure European culture over the mestizo culture that had prevailed under the Dutch East India Company (VOC).²⁸

At the same time that the Dutch elite were seeking to maintain their distinctiveness from this hybrid Eurasian world, certain tragic events also placed a greater distance between the Dutch and the Javanese elite. In particular, the Java War of 1825-30 marked a watershed between the trading era of the VOC, when Dutch relations with the central Javanese kingdoms were similar to ambassadorial links, and the colonial period of the Cultivation System (roughly 1830-1870), when these kingdoms found themselves in clearly subordinate positions to the Dutch.²⁹ On a more popular level, it was also during the Java War that many disparate social elements experienced a stronger sense of their own Javanese identity and united under the charismatic anti-European, and conservative leadership of the "just king" (ratu adil), Dipanagara, and through the anti-European sentiments and conservative agenda of Dipanagara's struggle.³⁰

The Java War and its immediate antecedents also marked a watershed in Javanese-Chinese relations, for much of the anti-Chinese bitterness and suspicion that can be found during the colonial years began at this time. As for the Chinese, their experiences during this period likewise made them aware of their vulnerable position in Javanese society. This awareness steered them away from assimilation into the Javanese world towards the maintenance of their Chinese identity, along with which came certain legal privileges that the Europeans provided them.³¹

Given this background, it is interesting that Phan Huy Chú did not give any indication of there being strong distinctions between the various groups in the archipelago. He did note that the Chinese and Dutch lived separately and were under their own respective administrations: an arrangement that mirrored the general practice in Viet Nam at the time. However, he also noted how the Dutch did not differentiate between officials and commoners in many social situations. This, to Phan, was a great fault, leading him to conclude that "They [the Dutch] do not know the teachings of Chu [the Zhou kings of Chinese antiquity] and Khong [Confucius], and therefore, although they may be skillful at many different things, they are still barbarians."³²

As for the Chinese and Javanese, Phan noted that time invariably led to the mixing of these two groups, for in discussing the Chinese population he noted that, "there are those who after two or three generations can speak the local language, and although they still wear northern clothes, their customs are entirely the same as the do Bà [Javanese]." ³³ What is more, this intermingling was leading to disastrous consequences, the import of which became clear to Phan when he visited what he said was the only Confucian academy in Batavia, and made the following remarks:

The only place where Master Chu ³⁴ is worshipped is the Minh Thành Academy However, this

place is deserted and in ruins; its doors and walls already covered with moss. I went with a scholar from Mân [i.e., Fujian], Truong Nhuan Bá. We passed through the weeds, opened the gate, and went into the entry hall to have a look. I saw that the tablets and ritual instruments were all cold and abandoned. This spectacle moved me to great sadness, and I asked Nhuan Bá what the cause of it was. He answered that "The administration of the school has always been under the control of the Giáp dai Hán [kapitan]. The current one is the offspring of a Ba [35](#) woman. He does not understand anything about studies and, therefore, has let the school go to ruins. The other people of Mân do not know what to do about the situation." Goodness! The way of the former kings has spread all over so that among Chinese and Barbarians there are none that do not respect it. Mân is the birthplace of the Teacher, and yet, the merchants who come south think only of profit and forget righteousness. That these long accumulated evil effects have led to this is tremendously regrettable.[36](#)

Visiting Batavia twelve years later, Cao Bá Quát; t, In contrast to Phan Huy Chú, could see clear lines distinguishing not only the main ethnic groups in the archipelago but also the hierarchy of relations that they occupied. Nowhere is this more evident than in the first of his three "Miscellaneous Poems from Ha châu" (Ha châu tạp thi):

Lâu các trung trung giáp
thủy tân,

Storied houses layer upon layer by the
water's edge,

Tung âm lương xu do hoa
xuân.

In the cool spots under the shade of pines
strange flowers bloom.

Thiet ly vô toa quy xa
nhập,

Through unlocked steel gates the
returning carriages enter,

Ca ca o nhân ngừ bạch
nhân.

Each with dark-skinned men driving the
white.[37](#)

While this verse was inspired by what Cao Bá Quát saw in Singapore, he recorded comparable images of Batavia. For instance, in one poem Cao recalled how he "discussed high matters" in the home of the Chinese kapitan, Tô Tiên Ti (Su Tianbi, or Souw Tian Pie), with its "library like a divine palace." This he then contrasted with what he imagined was transpiring in the nearby Dutch residences where, devoid of any culture, "those others gazed at their white, storied homes."[38](#) Hence, in Cao Bá Quát's poetry we get a sense that the Europeans are clearly segregating themselves from all non-Europeans, be it through the exploitation of the native Malays/Javanese or through their cultural incompatibility (at least from Cao's Sino-Vietnamese perspective).

In addition to describing the existence of stricter boundaries between the Europeans and other peoples in the region than Phan Huy Chú had noted, Cao Bá Quát also described the Chinese

community in Batavia in more positive terms than Phan had done. In fact, Cao visited the exact same Confucian academy that Phan had so sorely lamented, but had a completely different reaction. The following comments come from the introduction that Cao wrote to three poems he composed for the academy:

As for Ba[tavia]'s Minh Thanh Academy, the Fujianese established it as a site to pay homage to the Confucian patriarch Master Chu. Recently in China heterodox teachings have gnashed at each other like snarling canines. However, the way of the sages has fortunately not declined thanks to the fact that the teachings of Master Chu have already illumined all under heaven. The city of Ba[tavia] is in a remote spot beyond the seas, and its customs are very different from those of China. How wonderful it is then that Fujianese who arrive here and become, to a certain degree, barbarized still know to honor their predecessors, and thereby maintain the proper Chinese rites. Is this not proof of the depth to which the way of the sages has penetrated these people?³⁹

The contrast between Phan Huy Chú's and Cao Bá Quát's impressions of this academy provide much food for thought. If Phan's description is to be taken literally, then it is obvious that the academy was renovated sometime between 1833 and 1844. Was this because a new kapitan came to power who was more interested in maintaining the academy than the son of the Ba woman had been? Or is the renovation a sign of Carey's claim that the Chinese began to move away from assimilation at this time towards a more conscious maintenance of their own Chinese identity? Without more in depth information about the Chinese community during these years it is still impossible to say for sure, but it is obvious that changes were taking place.

Just as Phan Huy Chú and Cao Bá Quát depicted differing degrees of separation between Europeans and non-Europeans, so did they appraise the potential threat of the Europeans differently. Phan generally harbored a mixed view of Westerners. He was often baffled by their skill in some fields, and utter barbarity in others. Dutch writing techniques, for instance, were a clear indication of their barbarity:

The Hollanders' writing is all slanted and tied together. To look at it is like looking at worms. When superiors and inferiors report to each other they write on paper, horizontally, and do not employ seals. The writing of barbarians is thus negligent.⁴⁰

However, their artistic skills were unsurpassed by even Wang Wei (699-759) and Wu Dazi (8th cent.), two of China's greatest painters. What is more, Phan added, "the Hollanders appear to have acquired this skill naturally, that is, they did not learn it from China."⁴¹

Comparison with China was the main yardstick by which Phan Huy Chú appraised the strength of the Westerners. With the imperfect information he often received from his informants, this could easily turn the scales in favor of the West, as it did when Phan explained the Western method for recording years:

The regimes of the Great West do not have reign names and they do not mark the year that their monarchs ascended to the throne. Whenever they record some event they just write at the bottom of the page, "the Holland year of 1833, such-and-such a month, such-and-such a day." This is a general practice among the Red Hairs and the Hollanders. And when they translate Chinese documents they also do it in this style. They probably count from the year that the Hollanders established their country. If we reckon back 1,800 years that would be the beginning of the Han [dynasty] in China, and the time of An Duong Vuong in our own country. In that time the Chinese have gone through so many different dynasties, while these Hollanders have perpetuated through that time.⁴²

Even with such signs of strength as a 2,000-year unbroken history, Phan still did not impart any sense that the Westerners were a particular danger to the region. Indeed, he devoted as much space in his travelogue to discussing the Chinese in Batavia as he did to the Dutch. It seems evident that Phan saw the Dutch in Batavia as simply a part of the society, not its master. They were, to be sure, an important force to reckon with, but they were not (as of yet) the sole authority.

Cao Bá Quát, on the other hand, came to the realization during his journey that the Europeans were a tremendous threat to the region. This realization came about as his prior opinions mixed with both what he learned from the various Chinese he talked with during his trip, and with what he saw with his own eyes. One event that had invariably colored Cao Bá Quát's perceptions of Westerners by the time he set off on his journey was the Opium War in China. This brief Sino-British conflict had inflicted a disastrous impact on the Vietnamese economy. Forced, after the settlement of the war, to pay in silver for opium imports, the Chinese turned to external sources to make up for the great outflow of the metal that was pouring from their own country. Certain Vietnamese then saw this as an opportunity for self-enrichment and began to illicitly accumulate and export silver to China to meet the demand; a situation which led to inflation and hardships in Viet Nam. In addition, the war upset the usual prosperous trade between Viet Nam and southern China in numerous other commodities including certain items, such as Chinese drugs, that the Vietnamese obtained only through import from China. Thus, by the time Cao Bá Quát set off on his trip, Westerners were seen by many in Viet Nam as great disrupters of the usual patterns of trade and livelihood.⁴³

This having been said, in the early stages of his trip Cao does not seem to have felt that the changes taking place in the world were irreversible. Only after he had met and discussed these issues with a number of Chinese in the region, and had seen the Western steamships plying the waters, did he understand the seriousness of what was occurring. In fact we can see in his poetry how he went from questioning what was happening to a sense of total despair when he realized that the changes were very likely to be permanent. An example of his early questioning is evident, for instance, in a poem that he offered to the Chinese merchant Hoang Lien Phuong (Huang Lianfang) in Riau, where he ends with the four lines:

Hai thuy dong luu qua Bét
Ne,

The sea waters flow to the east, passing
Borneo,

Van trung châu d bích the
the.

And ten thousand islets of luxuriant
verdure.

Thinh quân thí v n châu
tien nguyet,

Please, sir, let me inquire about this moon
above these isles,

Ha sù nien nien canh
huong tây?

Why is it that from year to year it faces
more toward the west?^{[44](#)}

While in this poem Cao is still wondering why the West is becoming ever more powerful in the region (i.e., why the moon is facing more and more towards the west), it appears that he soon began to realize the irreversible nature of the changes that were taking place. In a later poem that Cao presented to a Chinese merchant, Hoang Lien Phuong, Cao concluded with the lament:

Ngã thi Trung Nguyen cùu
nhân vat,

I am likewise of old from the Central
Plain,

Tây phong hoi thu le phân
phân.

Before the west wind, I turn my head as
my tears fall.^{[45](#)}

As Cao continued on his journey toward Batavia he had chance to see many Western steamships plying the seas, and it appears that the presence of these ships only increased his sense of impending doom. In his "Ode for a Red Hair's Fire Ship" (Hong Mao Hoa Thuyen Ca) he marvels at how fast these vessels could move, sailing as they did "without sails, without oars, without people to push." He also began to remark on the unequal relationship between Westerners and the natives, as can be seen in the same poem when Cao notes how some Westerners acted after anchoring ship:

Hoan nhi ung ty dàm tieu
lai,

They call a lad over, noses held high,
talking and laughing,

Tuyet khóa nga cân nghiêu
tuong lap.

Seeing their snow-white trousers and high
caps, they crowd around the ship.^{[46](#)}

The power of these ships that "puffed up black smoke into hundred meter piles" which then

stretched and curved in the sky "like celestial dragons," as well as both the haughty behavior of the Westerners and the naiveté of the locals, all produced in Cao a sense of impending danger. He accordingly warned in the last lines of the poem:

Khai châm đông khu than tù gioi,	When you set your compass to the east and go, be careful,
B t ty tây minh trieu mo trào.	For unlike in the Western seas, here the tides are in danger. ⁴⁷

This sense of urgency, however, was not reciprocated by the Chinese he met in Batavia. In fact, Cao Bá Quát's most biting criticism in all of the poems composed on this journey is of the attitude of the Chinese in Batavia toward the changes taking place in the world. He does this by describing a Chinese opera performance in Batavia, and contrasts the valiant behavior of the protagonists in the drama with the Chinese spectators' total disinterest toward the tragedy that had recently transpired in their homeland (the Opium War). This poem, entitled, "In the Evening, watching Qing men perform at a theater" (Đa Quan Thanh Nhân Hí Truong Dien Hí), is as follows:

Liet cu thoi minh toi thuong dan,	Torches arrayed dazzle the high stage,
Nhat thanh ham khoi da phong han.	A sudden cry, and the night wind turns cold.
Kích tu trang si phuong hoanh giap,	The bearded brave man, armed from top to bottom,
No muc tuong quân di cu an.	With crossbow and fierce eyes, mounted haughtily on the saddle.
Xu the khoi vo chân dien muc,	Out in the world, how is it that such true appearances are absent?
Phung trung lang tieu co y quan,	People come to the theater and laugh unrestrained at the old gowns and caps.
Ho Mon can su quân tri phu?	Have you, sirs, not heard of the recent incident at Ho Mon? ⁴⁸

Than tuc ha nhân ung ti
khan.

Oh pity! What kind of people can just
keep watching, their noses upturned!⁴⁹

Having spent a good deal of time observing the European presence in the area and having sounded out the local Chinese response, Cao Bá Quát was astounded to find that the Chinese were not as outraged as he was. They, however, had other matters to worry about. In the changing dynamics of Java, a society recently rocked by a popular uprising and now entering a period of harsh colonial rule, the local Chinese were doing their best to find a safe niche. They knew that it would take more than the bravado of a Chinese opera star to resist the Dutch. Given their limited means, the better option was to make the best of the changing times, an option which Cao, the firebrand, could not accept.

Conclusion

Anthony Reid, in his perennial quest to create a meaningful periodization for Southeast Asian history, has recently suggested the label of a "Chinese Century" for the period from 1740-1840, for it was during this time, he explains, that the Chinese government overcame its "disabling antipathy towards the overseas enterprise of its emigrant population" and began to, if not encourage, at least condone the junk trade and the practice of sojourning abroad.⁵⁰ While Reid did not explain why he chose 1840 as a closing date for this period, the travel accounts of Phan Huy Chú and Cao Bá Quát certainly appear to confirm that important changes regarding the Chinese in Batavia took place around that date.

While Phan and Cao were both influenced by a Chinese world-view which tended to belittle foreign peoples and societies, by comparing their two texts, and taking into account their individual personalities, we can still get a sense of certain developments. Phan, the scholar, may have understated the power of the Europeans in his narrative, and Cao, the iconoclast, may have overstated the same in his lines of verse. However, when we remember that much of their impressions were filtered through the medium of the local Chinese, we also have to ask to what extent Phan's and Cao's differing remarks were a result of changing opinions among the Chinese in the area. Perhaps by 1844, the changes in relations between the Dutch, Chinese, and Javanese that the Java War inaugurated, and the Cultivation System exacerbated, had become quite clear to them. The local Chinese had realized that their century had come to an end and were now continuing on as best they could. Yet to an outsider like Cao Bá Quát, that was shocking news.

Notes

1 John Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 2, no. 2 (1961): 72.

2 O. W. Wolters, *The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), ix.

3 Alexander Barton Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: a Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971; reprint, Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, 1988), 264-65.

4 Woodside notes that by the 1930's the smuggling of opium on official ships was a common offense, and that after 1836 the Boards of Finance and Public Works, as well as the Censorate, all had to send representatives to the returning ships to jointly confer and investigate before the passengers were allowed to disembark. Woodside, 266-67.

5 Chen Jinghe, Les Missions Officielles dans les Ha châu ou 'Contrées méridionales' de la Première Période des Nguyễn, Bulletin de L'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 81 (1994): 102, 105, 113-15.

6 In terms of their destinations, the missions can be broken down as follows: 19 to Ha châu [This term changed in meaning over the years. At first it appears to have indicated Melaka and Penang (1788-1801), then until 1823 it was how the Vietnamese referred to Singapore, and finally, from 1826-1840, it was a designation for Singapore, Melaka and Penang, i.e. the Straits Settlements.], 13 to Batavia, 6 to Singapore, 3 to the Small Seas to the West, 2 to Penang, 2 to Semarang, 2 to Luzon, 1 to Johor, and 1 to Goa and Melaka. Chen, 119.

7 Phan Huy Lê, Claudine Salmon and Ta Trong Hiệp, trans., Un Êmissaire Viêtnamien à Batavia, Phan Huy Chú "Récit Sommaire d'un Voyage en Mer (1833) (Paris: Cahier d'Archipel, 1994), 7-19.

8 At the same time he was also invited to join a select poetry society that included imperial princes among its members. His response to this invitation augured the difficult times ahead, for Cao Bá Quát not only declined the invitation, but went on to state in a poem that their poetry was reminiscent of the stench from the rotting fish and shrimp carried by the ships from Nghê An (where fish sauce was produced). Woodside, 225-26.

9 Claudine Salmon and Ta Trong Hiệp, L'Émissaire Vietnamien Cao Bá Quát (1809-1854) et sa Prise de Conscience dans les 'Contrées Méridionales,' Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 81 (1994): 126-28.

10 Richard E. Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes, Travel Writing From Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 12.

11 Phan Huy Chú es account is presented in the Chinese original, as well as in French and Vietnamese translations in Phan Huy Lê, Claudine Salmon and Ta Trong Hiệp, trans., Récit

Sommaire. Hereafter, all citations to this text will be to the Chinese original and will be abbreviated as Htcl. As for Cao Bá Quát's poems, reference hereafter will likewise be to the originals as they are found in Cao Bá Quát, *Cao Chu Thân thi tập* (The Collected Poems of Cao Chu Thân[i.e., Cao Bá Quát]) (Sài Gòn: Bộ giáo dục, Trung tâm học liệu, 1971) Vol. II, which will be abbreviated as CCTtt. To aid in translating, I have also consulted, in addition to the works mentioned here and in note 9, the following two works: Nguyen Khac Vien and Huu Ngoc, eds., *Anthologie de Litterature Vietnamienne*, Tome II (Hanoi: Editions en Langues Etrangères, 1973), and Pham Thiêu and Đào Phuong Bình, eds., *Tho Di Su* [Embassy Poetry] (Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1993).

12 Woodside, 234-46.

13 See above, note 6 for the areas that this term referred to.

14 "Châu" literally means "continent", but it was often used by the Chinese in the names of archipelagos or island chains.

15 Dashan Hanweng, *Haiwai Jishi* [Record of Overseas Events] (Taipei: Guangwen shuju youxian gongsi, 1969), 64. Dashan Hanweng was a Chan Buddhist monk who traveled to Viet Nam by invitation of the southern king, Nguyễn Phúc Châu, in 1694 to spread the dharma.

16 Htcl, 189.

17 Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird, Tang Images of the South* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 245.

18 Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680, Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 42.

19 Htcl, 203.

20 Cai Tinglan, *Hainan Zazhu* [Miscellaneous Notes from the Southern Seas] (Taipei: Taiwan yinhang yinshuasuo, 1959), 55. Cai Tinglan, the director of an academy on the island of Penghu in the Taiwan Straits, was blown off course in a typhoon in 1835 when he was returning to the island from the Fujianese port of Xiamen. After landing in central Viet Nam, he traveled overland to China, recording everything of interest along the way.

21 Htcl, 204.

22 Htcl, 207-8.

23 Stevan Harrell, Introduction to Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers, ed. Stevan Harrell, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 10.

24 CCTtt, 446.

25 CCTtt, 446.

26 "Red Hairs" (Hông Mao) was actually the Chinese appellation for the British. Throughout his account, however, Phan repeatedly confused this term with that for the Dutch: Hòa Lan, or, Hollanders. In this passage he is again using the wrong term and should instead be referring to the Hollanders.

27 Htcl, 187.

28 Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

29 P. B. R. Carey, The Origins of the Java War (1825-30), *The English Historical Review*, 91, no. 358 (Jan. 1976): 52.

30 P. B. R. Carey, Waiting for the 'Just King': The Agrarian World of South-Central Java from Giyanti (1755) to the Java War (1825-30), *Modern Asian Studies*, 20, pt. 1 (Feb. 1986): 60-1.

31 P. B. R. Carey, Changing Javanese Perceptions of the Chinese Communities in Central Java, 1755-1825, *Indonesia*, no. 37 (April 1984): 41.

32 Htcl, 202.

33 Htcl, 204.

34 Master Chu is Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the Song dynasty scholar who synthesized various strands of thought into what we now refer to in the West as Neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi was born in Fujian province, and thus, the reference later in this passage to the Teacher is likewise to Zhu Xi.

35 Ba here indicates a mixed-blood Chinese-Javanese: what would now be referred to as a baba or peranakan. Thus, the current kapitan of the Chinese community was the son of a Chinese father and a mixed, Chinese-Javanese mother.

36 Htcl, 206-207.

37 CCTtt, 444.

38 CCTtt, 459.

39 CCTtt, 456.

40 Htcl, 202.

41 Htcl, 200.

42 Htcl, 188.

43 Woodside, 276-281.

44 CCTtt, 448.

45 Here the "Central Plain" refers to the Chinese Central Plain, the area where Chinese civilization originated. As for the west wind, it is another reference to the West. The title of this poem is, Moved while talking with Hoàng Liên Phuong about overseas events, I brushed out a verse and presented it to him (Du Hoàng Liên Phuong Ngu Cáp Hải Ngoại Su, Triệp Huu So Cầm, Tâu Bút Du Chi). CCTtt, 448.

46 CCTtt, 445.

47 CCTtt, 445-46.

48 Hô Môn (Chinese, Humen) is the area near Canton that is known in English as the Bogue. It is here a general reference to the events of the Opium War.

49 CCTtt, 459.

50 Anthony Reid, *Historiographical Reflections on the Period 1750-1870 in Southeast Asia and Korea*, *Itinerario*, 18, no. 1 (1994): 83.